

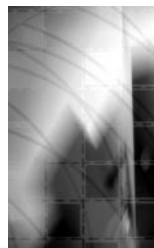


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Avoiding the 'McJobs': unemployed job seekers and attitudes to service work

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ABSTRACT

Service employment plays an increasingly important role in the UK economy. However, it has been suggested that some forms of service work are unattractive for many unemployed job seekers, and particularly those formerly employed in 'traditional' sectors. The argument has been made that these job seekers and others may be reluctant to pursue the type of positions that have become known as 'McJobs' – de-skilled, entry-level service jobs which often offer poor pay and conditions. This article examines whether there is such a reluctance amongst job seekers to pursue service work, and whether it differs between job seeker groups. It also compares differences in job seekers' attitudes towards entry-level work in three areas of the service sector – retail, hospitality and teleservicing or 'call centre work'. The analysis is based upon a survey of 300 registered unemployed people in Scotland. A substantial minority of respondents ruled out entry-level service work in retail and hospitality under any circumstances. Older men, those seeking relatively high weekly wages and those without experience of service work (and who perceived themselves to lack the necessary skills) were particularly reluctant to consider these jobs. Differences between job seekers were much less apparent in relation to attitudes to call centre work, which was more unpopular than other service occupations across almost all groups. The article concludes that policy action may be required to encourage job seekers to consider a broader range of vacancies and to provide financial and personal support for those making the transition into work in the service economy. However, on the demand side, service employers must seek to 'abolish the McJob', by ensuring that even entry-level positions offer realistic salaries, decent work conditions and opportunities for personal development.

KEY WORDS

call centres / hospitality / retail / selective job seeking / service work / unemployment

Introduction

McJOB: A low-pay, low-prestige, low-dignity, low-benefit, no future job in the service sector. Frequently considered a satisfying career choice by people who have never held one.'

Douglas Coupland: *Generation X*.

The current British government has expressed the view that 'work is the best form of welfare' (DfEE, 2001). Social inclusion is arguably largely equated with labour market inclusion within many of the government's policies for unemployed people of working age (Powell, 2000; Pavis et al., 2001). Supply-side programmes such as the New Deal have accordingly sought to ensure that participants adopt a rigorous approach to looking for work and a 'realistic' job search strategy (Evans, 2001).

Critics of this approach to promoting welfare to work argue that many of the service jobs that increasingly dominate urban labour markets are not suitable for certain groups, with older male job seekers particularly unlikely to favour these occupations. Indeed, there is some evidence that job seekers with experience in more traditional industries are reluctant to 'take a risk' on accepting service work, which they perceive to be typically insecure and low paid (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2002). It would appear that some of these job seekers have concluded that the service economy offers only the prospect of becoming trapped in low-status, low-paid work – the equivalent of the so-called 'McJobs' encountered by the protagonists of the popular novels of Douglas Coupland.

However, little detailed research has been carried out in order to establish the impact of these concerns about service work on the job search strategies of different groups. Similarly, there is limited available evidence as to job seekers' different attitudes towards specific occupations and areas of employment within the service sector. This article seeks to investigate these issues. It discusses the job search targets of unemployed job seekers and the impact of former experience in the labour market and other personal characteristics on these individuals' 'sought occupations'. The article also specifically examines the attitudes of job seekers towards entry-level work in three areas of the service sector (retail, hospitality and teleservicing or 'call centre work') and explores differences in the approach and attitudes of job seekers towards these different forms of service work.

The analysis is based upon a survey of 300 registered unemployed people in one Scottish local authority area (with the vast majority of responses gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews). Following this intro-

duction, the article briefly discusses the context for the analysis: the concept of the 'good' or 'better' job, and how this ideal type differs from some readings on work in the 'new capitalism' and the experiences of those employed in entry-level, interactive service occupations; and the broader implications of the growth of service work for labour market exclusion. The third part of the article then provides a summary of the study areas, a profile of the sample and the research methodology. The fourth part reports initial findings on the occupational preferences of unemployed job seekers and attitudes towards working in selected areas of the service sector. Finally, we draw conclusions from the preceding analysis and, after reviewing the current labour market policy context, suggest areas for further research and policy action.

Unemployment, job seeking and the rise of the service economy

'Good jobs', 'McJobs' and the service economy

The rise of the so-called 'service economy', with employment opportunities dominated by a range of service-related industries, continues unabated (see, for example, Fisher, 1935; Fuchs, 1968; Castells, 1996). By the year 2000, 73 per cent of jobs in the UK were located in services (European Commission, 2001). However, it should be noted that any attempt to discuss job seekers' attitudes towards a single, homogeneous 'service sector' involves imposing a degree of generalization that risks denying the term any real meaning (USNRC, 1999). Within the generally accepted sub-sector classifications of distributive, personal, producer and social services, service work encompasses tasks ranging from clerical and administrative support to sales to more basic forms of 'personal services' (Singlemann, 1978; Bosch et al., 2001).

Nevertheless, the rapid expansion of service employment (in all its forms) has had profound – and in some ways negative – consequences for workers and local economies alike. For Sassen (1996), the polarization of workers' pay and conditions and the casualization of employment relations that increasingly characterize urban labour markets are an inevitable consequence of the rise of the service economy (with these general trends accentuated within service work itself). These concerns over the consequences of the transition to the service economy to some extent reflect the broader debate regarding the inability of certain social groups to access 'good work' (Westwood, 2002).

As Ezzy notes, the individual's moral evaluation of their life is integrally related to the subjective narratives that they construct about themselves, with life in the workplace no exception: 'Evaluations of "good" as opposed to oppressive labour are therefore also integrally related to the narratives through which people make sense of their work' (Ezzy, 1997: 437). For Sennett (1998) 'good' work is increasingly difficult to locate. Instead, Sennett views work in the 'new capitalism' as disorienting and ultimately degrading for many individuals.

Although the rigidities of the 'old' work, with its hierarchies and routines, could have negative consequences in terms of the denial of individual expressiveness, Sennett does not see the 'new' work, where risk, personal flexibility, networking and short-term teamwork are the norms, as progress.

This broad portrayal of 'old' and 'new' work has been disputed, but for Sennett old forms of work organization allowed for career-long progression, and a resulting sense of belonging and character. The constant need for career re-engineering and personal reinvention that is a key characteristic of the new economy therefore threatens this sense of character, by corroding trust, loyalty, and mutual commitment and inflicting 'demeaning superficiality' on human relations. New approaches to management have, Sennett argues, undermined continuity in the workplace – where once individuals could fashion not only a career but a sense of self and personal history through work, there is now only a sense of aimless drift: 'The conditions of time in the new capitalism have created a conflict between character and experience, the experience of disjointed time threatening the ability of people to form their characters into sustained narratives' (Sennett, 1998: 37).

Durand (1998) is similarly pessimistic, arguing that there is little prospect of the 'better job' – one that permits employees to 'blossom' due to task autonomy, control over their environment and real responsibility – emerging through new forms of working. Durand points to the diffusion of post-Fordist, 'Toyotist' methods of organization from manufacturing to other areas of the economy, including tourism, retail and other key components of the service economy. Such methods of organization emphasize 'tightened' flows of production and just-in-time operation. It is an approach that has serious repercussions for the individual's task and time autonomy in the workplace: 'From this perspective, the Fordist principle of the conveyor has not been surpassed but, on the contrary, has been systematized and generalized to production as a whole' (Durand, 1998: 191).

For Durand, new forms of work and new technologies have therefore resulted in the polarization of experiences in the workplace, with improving pay and benefits and opportunities for personal development for those skilled workers within what he calls the 'core of production' compared with increasing work intensity and rationalization, and less task and time autonomy for the majority involved within the 'flow of production' itself (although even workers within the core of production have seen task autonomy 'eaten away' by increased automation). Given this context: 'the likelihood of seeing the emergence of a "better job" appears slim' (Durand, 1998: 192). Durand suggests that the continuing weakness of the trade union movement will further limit progress towards better conditions and the 'humanization of work', with improvements only likely to occur from the top down, in response to significant and sustained labour shortages (which are currently not present in most western economies).

Within this general theoretical context, specific concerns have been raised regarding the operation of the service economy. Although a group of skilled,

professionalized service occupations has emerged and continues to expand (Illeris, 2002), it has been suggested that the majority of those working in services find themselves restricted to de-skilled, rationalized jobs which tend to lack the social benefits, job security and pay structures associated with even lower skilled forms of employment in 'traditional' sectors such as manufacturing (Nelson, 1994). Yet these 'McJobs' (low skilled, low paid, service occupations) have become an increasingly important source of work, particularly for women and young people (Hatt, 1997).

American research has also noted that the low status end of the service economy (in this case 'fast food' work) offers few opportunities to access 'better' job roles (Talwar, 2002). Service work of this kind does require a range of skills, but the lack of status afforded to such job roles means that workers gain little in terms of financial or social benefit in the immediate term and struggle to move up the jobs ladder in the longer term, although some may successfully use the job as a 'stepping stone' to other jobs. Furthermore, work conditions in certain areas of the service economy, such as the fast food industry, may militate against the formation of informal, community-based links that could provide the upward mobility that the industry itself does not. Echoing Sennett, Talwar argues that such work fails to provide long-term relationships with co-workers, offers little in the way of work-life balance, and neglects to reward loyalty with permanent, full-time status and progression (all ways in which workers might otherwise develop their social capital and find routes into better work). These factors, combined with wage levels that deny workers independence and preclude (for example) their taking up wider training opportunities, condemn many to a cycle of in-work poverty, based on horizontal movements between short-term, low skilled service jobs.

Many critics of the rise of the so-called 'new economy' have therefore sought to explain labour shortages in certain areas of the service sector as evidence of an inevitable reaction against the growth in de-skilled jobs, which offer relatively poor pay and conditions, few opportunities for advancement and little in the way of variety and autonomy in individuals' working lives. Yet there is evidence that workers at the lower end of the service economy can develop sophisticated coping strategies to deal with the sense of alienation that might otherwise result from routinized, customer-facing job roles (McDowell, 2002; Korczynski, 2003) – just as those engaged in 'old' forms of work developed strategies to cope with the repetitive and often physically arduous tasks that were the reality of their everyday working lives.

Furthermore, as Newman (1999) notes, even the lowest skilled service work can, in the right circumstances, offer individuals benefits in terms of self sufficiency and the dignity of work, and the opportunity to develop a range of competencies, such as reliability and communication skills. The emotional labour required to carry out such customer facing work may also suit some types of workers (Hallier, 2001). These benefits are apparently not lost on entry-level service workers. Perhaps most tellingly, for the low paid, getting paid *at all* is the most important benefit of working (Edwards and Burkitt,

2001). Whatever the limitations and frustrations, work in the service economy provides a financial lifeline and a degree of independence for many people. It is therefore essential that we understand the barriers (both personal and circumstantial, on the supply side and the demand side) preventing unemployed people from pursuing entry-level service work.

The service economy and labour market inclusion

As noted earlier, the rise of the service economy can be viewed as a source of problems as well as opportunities. These concerns have regularly been raised about the growth of services within the UK economy, but there is little doubt that many policy makers view service industries, and particularly those involving labour-intensive, low- to medium-skilled work, as providing an important opportunity for large-scale employment creation and local economic development. Attracting major service employers has become a key priority for many local and national agencies charged with dealing with the stubbornly high unemployment created by the decline of manufacturing and other traditional industries in Britain's cities (Richardson et al., 2000). Within many such cities (particularly in the north of England and Scotland) the fragility of local labour demand has produced a fall in employment rates and rising levels of inactivity (Beatty et al., 2002). With the predicted large-scale service sector employment failing to materialize in these areas, the notion of the 'post-industrial city' based on service work and ICT has arguably proved to be 'a good spin, but a very partial reality' (Turok and Edge, 1999). Supply-side labour market policies have therefore struggled to address the strong correlation between weak labour demand and high 'welfare usage' (Peck, 1999; Martin et al., 2003).

Yet many other urban areas continue to report both pockets of high unemployment *and* recruitment and retention problems in the service sector (Shuttleworth and McKinstry, 2001). For Webster (2000) the reason for this contradiction is simple. Job seekers formerly employed in the traditional sectors have neither the skills nor the inclination to take up the 'white collar' employment that has replaced lower skilled manual work, although this argument becomes less sustainable as the cohort of older ex-industrial workers reduces and few younger entry-level potential service workers have ever worked in manufacturing. The skills sets demanded by service employers, whether 'soft skills' in sectors such as retail and tourism or IT literacy in areas such as tele-servicing, are unfamiliar to former manual workers with experience in (for example) manufacturing or construction.

Vacancy characteristics set by employers, such as length of contract, shift patterns and remuneration, also clearly impact on the attractiveness of job opportunities (Adams et al., 2000). The low pay and instability that is typical of *some* forms of service work therefore partially explain the failure of workers with experience in other sectors to find their way into service jobs. There is also evidence that employers involved in customer-facing service activities can discriminate against older job seekers and others considered 'unsuitable', given the

demands of 'aesthetic labour' (i.e. looking or sounding 'right') (Warhurst et al., 2000; Hollywood et al., 2003). This particular form of discrimination forms part of wider problem of ageism within recruitment and selection procedures (Duncan, 2003). Furthermore, while male job seekers can hold views of their position in the labour market that are strongly 'gendered', service employers tend to target women anyway, as they are more likely to accept part-time work and they are perceived to offer the type of soft skills that are often a prerequisite for service work (McDowell, 2002; Talwar, 2002).

However, there is some evidence to suggest that fears over the quality and stability of service work may result in a reluctance amongst some job seekers to pursue these opportunities (Grimshaw et al., 2002). These attitudes can be passed on to the children of former manual workers and other young people, who are themselves now looking for work in post-industrial areas (McDowell, 2000). Indeed, it has been demonstrated that young men, whilst holding surprisingly few gender-related prejudices towards the service sector, consider many entry-level service jobs to be low quality and a 'dead end', with few opportunities for progression (Lloyd, 1999).

Finally, it has also been suggested that the interaction of low paid opportunities in the labour market and inflexible elements within the benefits system acts as a specific disincentive in its own right. The long-term unemployed, who *can* adopt highly selective job search strategies, may be keen to rule out service work because they believe it to be low paid, thus not fully replacing the combined support offered by unemployment and housing benefits, and insecure, raising the threat of a prompt return to unemployment without being able to immediately reclaim the same benefits, which are often conditional on unemployment duration (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2002). To what extent are these concerns shared by different groups of job seekers? Does the general scepticism of job seekers towards service work directly affect their search behaviour, and which groups are most likely to definitely rule out looking for entry-level work in the service sector? What reasons lie behind unwillingness of some groups to consider service work? These questions are addressed in the analysis below.

The study area, methodology and sample information

The data for the study were collected between March and May 2001 in the West Lothian local authority area. West Lothian is located in Scotland's 'central belt', between the country's two largest cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh. The area's largest town, Livingston, is only 15 km from Edinburgh – Scotland's capital and a major UK tourist centre, which also boasts a rapidly expanding financial services sector. The West Lothian economy has traditionally been dominated by the mining and manufacturing industries. Despite recent job losses concentrated mainly in manufacturing, estimated claimant unemployment remained below the Scottish average at the time of the study. In terms of occupational structure, the wider Lothian area witnessed a rapid expansion in

service employment during the 1990s, with an estimated 25–30 percent increase in personal service and sales jobs between 1995 and 2000 (Scottish Enterprise, 2001). Approximately 43 percent of notified vacancies in the relevant travel-to-work-area (‘Edinburgh’) are currently located in customer services, sales, personal and protective services and other basic service occupations.¹

In total 300 responses were gathered from a random sample of unemployed job seekers. The majority of responses were gathered through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews (251), supplemented by a small number of postal questionnaires (49). In order to understand the barriers to work faced by disadvantaged groups, the long-term unemployed (duration over one year) were specifically targeted by the survey, and thus accounted for 34 percent of the sample, even though they were only 11 percent of the West Lothian claimant count. Women were also slightly over-represented in the sample (29%, compared to 22% of the local claimant count), with a similar proportion in both the long-term unemployed and pre-twelve months duration groups. Respondents were spread relatively evenly amongst age groups. Approximately 29 percent of the sample were aged 16–24, 26 percent were 25–34 and 21 percent were 35–44. A further 24 percent were aged over 45.

As Table 1 illustrates, many unemployed job seekers reported holding few or no qualifications, with approximately 36 percent of all respondents completely unqualified. Long-term unemployed people were much more likely to be disadvantaged in this way (50% held no qualifications, compared to 30% of other job seekers). Competing in a Scottish labour market where only 17 percent of workers are similarly unqualified (Scottish Office, 1998) these job seekers will be at a clear disadvantage.

The differences between the long-term unemployed and more recently out of work job seekers were less marked when it came to their regular occupations, with the exception that long-term unemployed people were much more likely

Table 1 Respondents’ levels of academic/vocational qualifications by duration (%)

Level of qualification	Duration	Duration	Total
	< 12 months	12 months +	
No qualifications ^a	30	50	36
SCE Standard Grade/equivalent ^b	47	31	42
SCE Higher Grade/equivalent ^c	14	12	14
Higher education qualification ^d	6	3	5
Degree level qualification	3	5	4
Total (% rounded)	100	100	100

n = 300

Notes:

^a ‘No qualifications’ includes those naming vocational qualifications not recognized in the Labour Force Survey.

^b ‘Standard grade or equivalent’ includes GSVQ, RSA diploma level and SVQ 1–2.

^c ‘Higher Grade or equivalent’ includes GSVQ advanced, RSA advanced diploma, SVQ level 3.

^d ‘Higher Education qualification’ includes HND, HNC, SVQ 4 and professional qualifications.

to report never having worked or having had no regular job (15%, compared to 6% of those unemployed for less than one year). However, Table 2 does clearly demonstrate that unskilled manual labour tends to be concentrated amongst those with low educational attainment (56% of those with no qualifications were regularly employed in such jobs compared to just 14% of those educated to SCE Higher Grade/A level or above).

Table 2 also shows that relatively few unemployed job seekers had previously regularly been engaged in service work. In total, just over one-fifth of job seekers had previously regularly worked in retail (11%) or other services (10%). In comparison, manual work, whether unskilled (38%) or skilled (11%) was far more typical of job seekers' previous experience. Experience in service jobs was relatively evenly distributed amongst qualified and unqualified job seekers. Approximately 16 percent of those holding no qualifications had been most regularly employed in retail or other service occupations, rising to 27 percent of those educated to SCE Standard Grade/GCSE level or equivalent. Those working in retail and other basic service jobs had a relatively young age profile. Approximately 27 percent of those aged under 25 had previously most regularly worked in basic service occupations, compared to only 19 percent of other job seekers. Women were also much more likely to work in entry-level service positions. Whereas 40 percent of all women surveyed had previously worked in either retail or other service jobs, the figure for all men was only 14 percent.

Hence, the sample of job seekers under analysis for the most part held few or no qualifications, and most typically worked in low skilled occupations. However, relatively few job seekers had a work history with a strong service sector component. This is not entirely unexpected, given that the claimant count tends to be male-dominated (reflecting benefit rules that continue to restrict the right of individuals within families to make single person claims). It is often assumed that men will be less likely than women to pursue work in the service sector. In terms of past work history, these initial findings support such

Table 2 Respondents' previous regular occupations, by level of qualification (%)

<i>Former occupation</i>	<i>None</i>	<i>SCE standard grade/equiv.</i>	<i>SCE higher grade/above</i>	<i>Total</i>
Professional/associate professional	6	2	24	8
Skilled manual	10	12	12	11
Craft and related	1	2	6	3
Plant/machine operators	4	5	3	4
Clerical/administrative	1	6	15	6
Personal/other services	9	13	9	10
Retail	1	14	11	11
Unskilled manual	56	33	14	37
None/never worked	7	13	5	9
Total (% rounded)	100	100	100	100

n = 300

a view. However, it is the future targets, or sought occupations, of job seekers that will determine the inclusiveness of their search strategies, and their ability to identify opportunities in the new, increasingly service-dominated economy.

Unemployment, job seeking and service employment

Attitudes towards work in the retail and hospitality sectors

When job seekers were asked about their primary sought occupation or main job search target, 22 percent named entry-level retail or other service occupations (21% had formerly been employed in such posts). In comparison, whereas 37% of respondents had previously worked in unskilled manual occupations, only 29 percent were primarily targeting those jobs (Table 3). The targeting of occupations outside service employment by the majority of job seekers (at odds with the manner in which services now account for a growing number of vacancies in the local economy) reflects the reality that many amongst the registered unemployed are former manual workers who are seeking similar work, despite the continuing decline of manufacturing and other ‘traditional’ industries. It is understandable that these job seekers should primarily target occupations in which they have previously been successful in finding work. However, if job seekers go further, in actively ruling out looking for other forms of employment, particularly in the expanding service economy, they may find their future job opportunities limited.

Respondents were therefore asked whether they would be willing to consider certain forms of entry-level service employment under *any* circumstances – the three particular areas of work suggested being retailing, hospitality work (e.g. bar work/waiting) and the call centre sector.² These occupations were selected given the proximity of the study area to cities with large retail interests, the importance of tourism to the economy of nearby Edinburgh, and the recent

Table 3 Respondents’ previous regular occupations and primary sought occupations (%)

Occupational group	Former occupation	Sought occupation
Professional/associate professional	8	11
Skilled manual	11	14
Craft and related	3	2
Plant and machine operators	4	6
Clerical and administrative	6	12
Personal and other services	10	12
Retail	11	10
Unskilled manual	37	29
None/never worked/don’t know	9	4
Total (% rounded)	100	100
<i>n</i> = 300		

establishment of major call centre facilities in Edinburgh and West Lothian itself. As Table 4 illustrates, 38 percent of respondents surveyed suggested that they would never, under any circumstances, consider entry-level retail work and 41 percent ruled out hospitality occupations. More than half of those responding (51%) suggested that they definitely ruled out looking for work in call centres. In total, 54 percent of respondents ruled out some form of service work from their job search.

Further analysis of 'who ruled out service jobs' demonstrates that the concern that men are not attracted to working in the service economy is to some extent justified. Table 5 shows the percentages of job seekers with certain characteristics definitely ruling out entry-level hospitality and retail work from their job search (a chi-squared test reveals statistically significant differences). Men were significantly (1% level using chi-squared test) more likely to rule out entry-level service jobs in the hospitality sector (47% compared to 27% of women), and in retailing (44% compared to 23%). Age also appeared to impact on job seekers' occupational preferences – those aged 25 and over were significantly (5% level) more likely to categorically exclude retail work from their job search (43% compared to 25% of those aged 18–24). The 18–24 age group were also

Table 4 Percentage who would consider looking for work in selected entry-level service occupations (% of all job seekers responding)

<i>Service occupation</i>	<i>Never consider</i>	<i>Possibly consider</i>	<i>Likely to consider</i>
Retail sector	38	46	16
Hospitality sector	41	44	15
Call centre sector	51	36	13
<i>n</i> = 245			

Table 5 Percentage of respondents definitely ruling out entry-level work in hospitality and retail, by selected respondent characteristic

<i>Respondent characteristic</i>	<i>Hospitality</i>	<i>Retail</i>
Male (female)	47 (27) ***	44 (23) ***
Aged 40 and over (under 40)	46 (40)	44 (35)
Aged under 25 (25 and over)	35 (45)	25 (43) **
Qualified to SCE Standard Grade (unqualified)	43 (41)	36 (41)
Long-term unemployed (not long-term unemployed)	40 (43)	36 (39)
Reported mostly stable employment (not mostly stable)	42 (42)	40 (36)
Regular occupation in services (not in services)	20 (48) ***	24 (43) **
Reported 'good' interpersonal skills (skills not 'good')	37 (49)	32 (46) **
Would consider part-time (wouldn't consider part-time)	42 (46)	34 (45)
Has dependent children (no dependent children)	24 (47)	29 (40)
Seeking at least £200 net weekly wage (less than £200)	58 (36) ***	53 (33) ***

n = 245 *** Significant at 1% level; ** Significant at 5% level.

less likely to rule out hospitality work (35% compared to 45% of the 25-plus group) although the difference here was not statistically significant. Dividing the sample into groups aged 18–39 and 40 and over, the differences are also clear, although not statistically significant. In short, there is some evidence that younger job seekers appear more willing to consider entry-level service employment.

Neither educational attainment nor recent work history were significantly associated with differences in the attitudes of job seekers towards working in services. Unqualified job seekers were rather more likely to rule out retail work and (41% compared to 36% of those with *at least* SCE Standard Grade/GCSE qualifications) and only slightly less likely to rule out hospitality work (41%–43%). Similarly, there were only slight differences between job seekers when the sample was divided according to unemployment duration. The long-term unemployed were very slightly less likely to exclude both retailing (43% compared to 40% of others) and hospitality work (39% compared to 36%) from their job search.

Furthermore, although it might be assumed that those with a stable work history would be *particularly* keen to rule out service employment (which is often characterized as unstable and casualized) there is little evidence that this is the case. Approximately 42 percent of those characterizing their work history as involving ‘mostly stable employment’ would never consider entry-level hospitality work, but exactly the same percentage of those who described a ‘less stable’ working life were similarly unwilling to consider these occupations. Those describing a stable work history were slightly more likely to rule out retail jobs (40% compared to 36% of other job seekers).

Perhaps understandably, there were much clearer differences between those who had worked in services, or characterized themselves as having skills that are crucial in service occupations, and other job seekers. Those previously regularly employed in service occupations were significantly less likely to exclude service work from their current job search. Only 20 percent of former service workers ruled out hospitality occupations compared to 48 percent of other job seekers (significant at the 1% level). Approximately 24 percent of service workers ruled out retail work, compared to 43 percent of others (significant at the 5% level). Similarly, respondents who described their interpersonal skills as ‘good’ were much less likely to demonstrate negative attitudes towards service work. Only 32 percent of job seekers characterizing their interpersonal skills as ‘good’ were unwilling to consider retailing, compared to 46 percent of those describing ‘adequate’ or ‘less than adequate’ skills in this area (significant at the 5% level). For hospitality sector work the figures were 37 percent and 49 percent respectively, although here the difference was not statistically significant.

Surprisingly, the differences in job seekers’ attitudes to service working were less obvious when the sample was divided according to preferences for full-time and part-time work. Those who were willing to consider working part time were understandably less likely to rule out service work, an area in which many jobs offer part-time hours. Although the differences were not significant,

those ruling out part-time work were rather more likely also to rule out working in retail (45% compared to 34% of those who would be willing to consider part-time work) and slightly more likely to reject hospitality occupations (46% compared to 42%). Yet the part-time hours offered by many service occupations may have been an incentive for some job seekers with family responsibilities. While amongst those with dependent children, 29 percent refused to consider retail jobs and 24 percent ruled out hospitality work, the figures for those without dependants were much higher at 40 percent and 46 percent for those respective occupations. Finally, it would seem that the levels of pay associated with service occupations are a disincentive for many job seekers. The majority of respondents who required a weekly take-home wage of above £200 were unwilling to consider entry-level retail or hospitality positions (significant at 1% level). On the other hand, those with lower wage aspirations were significantly (1% level) less likely to rule out jobs in retail (36% compared to 58% of these seeking wages in excess of £200) and hospitality (33% compared to 53%).

The results of this analysis reveal a reluctance to consider entry-level service jobs amongst many groups of job seekers. In particular, men aged 25 and over and those seeking weekly wages in excess of £200 after deductions were likely to rule out service jobs. Those who had not previously worked in services and perceived themselves as lacking the 'soft' skills required for such jobs were also particularly hostile to working in services. This raises a number of issues. It may be that the perception that employment in hospitality or retail is 'women's work' (or involves female-dominated workplaces) persists amongst many older men, and particularly those who have mainly worked in male-dominated industries. The more open attitude demonstrated by younger men may be tied to changes in attitudes, but also the fact that these job seekers are less likely to share the family and financial responsibilities of their older counterparts. Indeed, the low pay associated with entry-level service work emerges as one of the most important factors discouraging many job seekers from considering these jobs. Job seekers' perceptions of service jobs as typically being low paid may be inaccurate in some cases. However, in certain areas of the economy, there are few service jobs that would enable these job seekers to secure the level of pay that they suggested they required. For example, at the time of the fieldwork, the estimated gross pay for workers in 'personal service occupations' in the relevant travel-to-work-area was approximately £174 per week, well below the wage rate sought by many job seekers.³

The finding that job seekers' experience and perceived skills were linked to attitudes towards working in services is more positive for service employers. It is unsurprising that job seekers with little knowledge of the types of service work under discussion were more likely to eliminate these occupations from their job search. Similarly those who perceive themselves as having poor interpersonal skills are more likely to be reticent about pursuing opportunities in areas where 'people skills' are crucial. However, the reality is that these skills can often be developed relatively easily. Furthermore, there is evidence to

suggest that given the required incentives, training and support, job seekers with no experience of service work can make the transition to 'new economy' jobs from the traditional sectors where once they worked. Indeed, the retail sector has proved to be an important testing ground for innovative employability training and job and interview guarantee programmes, which have successfully assisted once-sceptical long-term unemployed people into service jobs (Lindsay and Sturgeon, 2003).

Where job seekers' perceptions of retail and hospitality work are affected by traditional views of gender roles, doubts over their own skills or prejudices about the value of serving the public, policy professionals seeking to promote access to work may have the opportunity to affect a change in attitudes through measures informing unemployed people about the range of job roles and career paths in the service sector, and training to enable individuals to develop appropriate skills. Where job seekers' reluctance to consider working in services instead reflects a more basic concern regarding levels of pay (concerns that are quite justified in many areas of the service economy) employers may eventually have to address their strategies in this area, if they wish to be able to draw labour from the deepest possible pool.

Is the 'new' service sector different? Attitudes towards call centre work

The call centre sector has witnessed rapid growth in recent years. Attracting call centre employers has become a priority for local policy makers and economic development professionals, especially in areas that have haemorrhaged jobs in 'traditional' industrial sectors (Gillespie et al., 2001; Richardson and Belt, 2001). However, the call centre sector also arguably represents a new and particularly effective manifestation of the 'industrialization of service sector work'.

As a growing and important sector in the service economy in general and in the study area in question, and as an area of work provoking both interest and controversy, the call centre sector provided a specific focal point for our survey work with job seekers. As Table 6 illustrates, whereas respondents tended to be divided with regards to their attitudes towards hospitality and retail work, the differences between the views of different job seeker groups were more marginal in the case of the call centre sector. In almost all cases, members of all job seeker groups were rather more likely to rule out call centre work than other service jobs. For example, whereas 40 percent of those describing their working life as 'mostly stable' and 36 percent of other job seekers refused to consider retail jobs, the proportions in these groups rose to 53 percent and 50 percent respectively when considering call centre work.

Similarly, while wage aspirations and perceptions of interpersonal skills appeared to be related to job seekers' different attitudes towards working in retail and hospitality, there seemed to be a more general reluctance to consider call centre jobs. While Table 5 shows that 53 percent of job seekers seeking weekly wages in excess of £200 would not consider retail work, compared to only 33 percent of those seeking less pay, over half of *both* of these groups were

Table 6 Percentage of respondents definitely ruling out entry-level call centre work, by selected respondent characteristic

<i>Respondent characteristic</i>	<i>Percentage of respondents</i>
Male (female)	54 (44)
Aged 40 and over (under 40)	52 (51)
Aged under 25 (25 and over)	44 (54)
Qualified to SCE Standard Grade (unqualified)	47 (59)
Long-term unemployed (not long-term unemployed)	50 (52)
Reported mostly stable employment (not mostly stable)	50 (53)
Regular occupation in services (not in services)	36 (55) **
Reported 'good' interpersonal skills (skills not 'good')	51 (50)
Would consider part-time (wouldn't consider part-time)	50 (57)
Has dependent children (no dependent children)	40 (54)
Seeking at least £200 net weekly wage (less than £200)	55 (52)

n = 245 *** Significant at 1% level; ** Significant at 5% level.

committed to excluding call centre work from their job search (55% of those seeking wages of £200 or more, and 52% of other job seekers took this view). However, occupational experience did make a difference. Again, those who had not regularly worked in service jobs were clearly, and in this case alone *significantly* (5% level) more likely to rule out call centre employment (55%, compared to just 36% of those who were former service workers).

With this one exception, there were no significant differences (at 5% level) between job seekers with different characteristics in terms of their rejection of call centre work. There did remain clear, but not statistically significant, differences according to age and gender. Those aged 25 and over were again clearly more likely to restrict their job search (in this case 54%, compared to 44% of the 16–24 age group). Similarly, men were clearly more likely to rule out call centre work (54%, compared to 44% of women). It is again worth noting, however, that there was a more general reluctance to consider call centre jobs. The 44 percent of women who ruled out call centre work, was much higher than the figure for women rejecting hospitality and retail jobs (27% and 23% respectively). Job seekers' views also differed according to family circumstances and educational attainment. Those with dependent children were again less likely to rule out service work in this area. The unqualified were rather more likely to refuse to consider call centre employment (59%, compared to 47% of those with qualifications). This latter finding may reflect the relatively high levels of literacy and IT skills required by some forms of call centre work, skills which many former manual workers may perceive to be beyond their reach. It is notable that unqualified job seekers were much more likely to respond negatively to call centre work (59%) than occupations in either retail or hospitality (both 41%).

As noted above, more than half of all job seekers responding to our survey (51%) categorically refused to consider looking for call centre work, a

substantially greater proportion than ruled out hospitality or retail occupations. While local policy makers and service providers may remain convinced of the value of attracting call centre facilities, many unemployed job seekers are unlikely to benefit from the opportunities created. Whether they considered themselves under-skilled to pursue call centre jobs, perceived the work to be low paid, unstable or unattractive, or simply could not contemplate moving from more traditional occupations into this highly rationalized form of service working, many unemployed people refused to include call centre employment in their job search. Call centres employ more than 5000 people in the West Lothian area, with the majority of staff female and aged in their 20s and 30s (CDEL, 2001). It would appear that policy professionals and call centre employers may have to adopt a range of strategies if they wish to broaden the appeal of these jobs to draw applicants from other groups within the unemployed population.

Discussion and conclusions

Job seekers' attitudes to service work – Avoiding the McJobs?

While the service economy continues to expand, many urban labour markets in the UK face the dual problems of labour shortages in services and pockets of persistently high unemployment. Policy makers have become increasingly convinced of the merits of initiatives to encourage unemployed people to target service sector employment and develop the skills required by service employers (Storrie, 2000). The above findings partially support such an approach. The potential for vulnerable groups, such as older job seekers and the long-term unemployed, to be excluded by many forms of service work has long been noted.

However, there is an additional problem in the manner in which many job seekers rule themselves out of service work, and seek to avoid making applications for vacancies in the service sector. We have demonstrated that for certain types of service work, such as retail and hospitality, this is a problem that differs across unemployed client groups, reflecting the varying characteristics and aspirations of job seekers. We have also shown that other types of entry-level service jobs are more likely to be viewed negatively by a majority of all unemployed job seekers, irrespective of individual characteristics, with call centre teleservicing offering a specific case in point.

It is unsurprising that job seekers who had formerly worked in so-called 'traditional' sectors were continuing to target jobs in those areas. It is perhaps of greater concern that many of these and other job seekers were determined to categorically rule out certain forms of service work, which account for a substantial and increasing proportion of job opportunities in local labour markets. Older male job seekers, those seeking relatively high weekly wages and those without experience of service work (and who perceived themselves to lack the

necessary skills) were particularly reluctant to consider service jobs in sectors such as retail and hospitality. It would appear that assumptions about the supposedly 'gendered' nature of some forms of service work and the skills required to do these jobs, combined with concerns over pay rates may have led many job seekers (and especially men) to reject entry-level retail and hospitality positions.

The call centre sector appears to be a special case. More than half of all job seekers responding categorically ruled out entry-level occupations in call centres. While job seekers' views on hospitality and retail employment tended to differ significantly according to gender, age group, wage aspirations, perceived interpersonal skills and previous work experience, opinions were more similar across groups when it came to call centre teleworking. Differences remained, but were only statistically significant in the case of job seekers' former experience in service employment (again pointing to the importance of previous work experience in affecting future job choice). Within almost all job seeker groups respondents were more likely to reject call centre work than retailing and hospitality jobs. This may be partially explained by the additional competencies required by teleworking, including IT and literacy skills. However, it may also be that many of the concerns commonly expressed regarding the low pay and intensive work conditions in some areas of the call centre sector (which may themselves account for the retention and absenteeism problems experienced by many call centre employers) have filtered through to job seekers.

Implications for research and policy

There are important implications for job seekers, employers and policy makers. First, the exclusion of service jobs by job seekers is far from trivial. There is evidence to suggest that building and maintaining a strong work record can be crucial in facilitating sustainable labour market inclusion for groups who might otherwise be vulnerable to long-term unemployment, such as young people and the low skilled (Gregg, 2001; Russell and O'Connell, 2001). Job seekers who rule out whole areas of the service economy risk eliminating a large and growing number of job opportunities from their search strategies, increasing the chance that they will experience multiple or prolonged periods of unemployment.

On the other hand, it would appear that service employers, who often struggle to recruit and retain staff, are likely to continue to face problems in attracting people unless they can convince job seekers that work in sectors such as retail, hospitality and teleservicing can offer a career ladder and opportunities to develop new skills and secure higher wage levels. It has been noted that while UK employers have adopted the language of 'employability', in many cases this rhetoric has not been matched by investment in delivering genuinely transferable training of value in the wider labour market (Hallier and Butts, 1999). In particular, smaller employers within the private sector have been reluctant to invest in skills (Harris, 1999). It has been suggested that a lack of awareness of the costs and benefits of training amongst employers partially

explains this *laissez faire* approach (Keep and Mayhew, 1996). However, a more fundamental problem appears to lie in the long-standing practice amongst employers of seeking to source skilled staff from other companies (Stevens, 1999). This 'free rider' approach to recruitment deters employers from investing in the skills of staff, who they fear may be 'poached' by competitors.

Our findings suggest that measures to provide opportunities for personal development in the medium to long term need to be combined with more immediate moves to provide realistic wage settlements for service workers. From the employers' perspective there may be clear benefits. Recruitment problems, and especially high rates of labour turnover, pose a major threat to productivity in service-focused organizations. The specific sectors and occupations discussed here are not immune from these pressures. Research for the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) has estimated that annual turnover in the hotel and leisure sector currently stands at 25 percent. Annual turnover in the retail sector is estimated at 33 percent, rising to 47 percent amongst those directly involved in sales occupations. These figures compare with a total labour turnover rate for all sectors of 18 percent (CIPD, 2002). Statistics for the call centre sector are more difficult to confirm, but it has been estimated that labour turnover here stands at 24 percent (IRS, 2002). Given the costs associated with the recruitment and training of new staff, there is an incentive for employers to act. Perhaps some of the elements that have previously led to what Durand calls the 'humanization' of work conditions are in place after all.

For policy makers, there is evidence that further action is required to promote the government's agenda on establishing a 'minimum infrastructure of decency and fairness around people in the workplace' (DTI, 1998: 3) if many job seekers are to be convinced to 'take a risk' on service work. Considerable progress has been made in employment policy in recent years. The introduction of the minimum wage has raised the earnings of entry-level staff in sectors such as hospitality, without major repercussions for the industry – although this is partially due to the flexibility enjoyed by service employers, who have been able to increase overtime demands on existing staff in order to reduce workforce numbers and so overall labour costs (Adam-Smith et al., 2003). Meanwhile, the development of policies designed to 'make work pay', culminating in the 2003 Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit reforms, arguably represent an acknowledgement by government of the need for additional financial support for those making the transition from welfare to work (Bryson, 2003).

These measures, combined with a raft of new legislation on leave entitlements, working time and the rights of part-time staff, have had a significant impact on day-to-day experiences of many service workers. There may yet be value in local policy makers and training providers working in partnership with service employers to promote entry-level service work as a 'first rung' on the jobs ladder, which can provide a much needed opportunity for unemployed job seekers to develop basic skills and experience. Nevertheless, it remains clear that such an approach can only be justified, and will only be successful in the long term, if government and employers are also willing to work together to

ensure progress towards continuous improvements in pay and conditions across the service sector.

Finally, there is a clear need for further, more detailed research in this area. The negative attitudes of many unemployed people towards service jobs can result in the elimination of these opportunities from individuals' search strategies. Yet as noted earlier, those who *are* able to make the transition into service employment often experience a change in their perceptions of this type of work. So-called 'McJobs' are instead seen as 'real work' by those for whom these jobs have provided a route out of poverty and towards self-sufficiency and independence (Newman, 1999). Further research is required to establish more clearly the crucial practical and attitudinal barriers preventing more job seekers from pursuing service employment. By developing a clearer understanding of the real and perceived barriers faced by these job seekers, policy makers can arrive at appropriate interventions, and the case for reform can be articulated before employers.

If unemployed people, and especially older male job seekers, are to be encouraged to expand their search to include entry-level service work, policies must be developed to provide them with the opportunity to gain experience in service-based work environments, with intensive, sector-specific training and financial support made available to assist in the transition from welfare to work. However, it is also the responsibility of service employers to 'abolish the McJob', by ensuring that even entry-level positions offer realistic salaries and working hours, decent conditions and some opportunity for personal development and advancement. Without such a commitment on the part of employers, entry-level positions in sectors such as retail, hospitality and teleservicing will continue to be viewed as 'McJobs' – 'considered a satisfying career choice by people who have never held one' – but to be avoided at all costs by many of those seeking jobs that offer financial security, career prospects and a degree of dignity and autonomy in the workplace.

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Notes

- 1 Source: NOMIS, Vacancies notified by Standard Occupation Code, February 2003.
- 2 It should be noted that those respondents surveyed via postal questionnaire were not asked these questions. As a result of this and a small number of 'no

comments' during interviews, the sample for these findings is 245 rather than 300.

- 3 Source: NOMIS, New Earnings Survey, 2001.

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